When It Comes to Tobacco, Children Don’t Have to Be Suckers

by C. Everett Koop
For four decades now, those of us interested in keeping young people from starting to smoke have been preaching the same old story: dirty lungs, cancer, heart disease, stroke, and addiction. The simple fact is that, by and large, it hasn’t worked. Youngsters who are contemplating the “great thrill” of taking up an adult behavior often do not hear the message about the disease, disability, and death that await them decades down the road.

Young people who live in poverty say to themselves, “Everything is against me. What’s one more thing like death from smoking when I’m 60?” Affluent young people figure life has been so good to them that they can buy their way out of any tobacco-related complications, including addiction and death. They go ahead and try smoking, and they get addicted.

For these reasons, and because I don’t know of anyone who has ever written for a scientific publication an outline of a program that truly works, my colleagues and I at the C. Everett Koop Institute at Dartmouth decided to try a different approach.

Today when I speak to high school students, many of whom already smoke, I no longer give my 50-minute lecture on science, health, and the dangers of smoking. Instead, I talk to them for just 10 minutes about some of the characteristics of being an adolescent, such as hating the control of parents and teachers. I explain that parents and teachers have good reasons for what they do, because they know where the land mines are buried.

I tell them it is surprising that young people—who often resent the control of those who love them—don’t mind turning over control to Big Tobacco, the most deceitful industry that has ever functioned on this planet. I explain that, when teenagers turn over this control they lose their wealth, health, and eventually their lives.

One of my biggest frustrations is that we can do a lot for the adult who is already addicted through medications, patches, and other forms of treatment. But no one’s ever come up with a good system for passing on to kids the important messages about tobacco that will keep them from starting to smoke. We wanted to get to the pre-smoker level and talk to children in the way that they like to be reached.

Reaching Out to Preadolescents

With this in mind, we decided to develop a message for the 8- to 10-year-old who was thinking: “Boy, how cool it will be when I can smoke!” We created a 28-minute video that implies the health risks of smoking but focuses on the evil empire of Big Tobacco that makes it all possible. Fortunately, we had a cartoon character—teenage technowizard Fall Down Brown—up our sleeves. Its creator, Dr. Sean David, was one of our family practice residents here at the Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center. Dr. David, a tobacco researcher who is now on the faculty at Brown University, had created Fall Down Brown in order to teach health messages to children in school. We resurrected Fall Down Brown to be the hero in our video, which we entitled Smoky Lies.

We wanted to educate preadolescents about the perils of smoking, but we wanted to present the information in as entertaining a format as we could. The video pits agents Nic Ban and the lovely martial arts expert Wu Yan of Stop Tobacco and Nicotine Dependency (STAND) against the evil Smoking Joe Moose, head of Moose Industries.

Moose has a diabolical plan to enslave the entire population of China by adding Liquid Evil, the most addictive substance ever known, to a new brand of cigarettes called Extreme Gold. The Chinese will not be able to quit smoking this type of cigarette, which will make Moose Industries the most powerful corporation in the history of the world.

Joining forces with Fall Down Brown and his mentor, Gadget Gramps, Nic and Wu Yan (which means “tobacco free” in Chinese) are eventually able to vanquish Smoking Joe. They crash a party being held to introduce his advertising campaign for Extreme Gold, break into his factory, disable his computers, and turn Moose into an addict by dousing him with his own Liquid Evil. They stop the shipment of Extreme Gold cigarettes to China and win the latest battle to keep the world smoke free and healthy.

We also developed a comic book—the Smoky Lies Mission Book—for students, a teacher’s guide, and a calendar that includes video images and facts. The student book has activities and sticker sheets designed to help children learn, for example, how to analyze media messages that make smoking seem like a popular, fun, and glamorous habit.

The long production cycle of Smoky Lies united scores of students from every sector of Dartmouth College. We provided opportunities for college students to learn video production, computer-generated graphics, and animation. The project combined all of this with art, music, drama, English, and engineering. Smoky Lies was a finalist at both the 2000 World Animation Celebration and the 2001 Santa Clarita International Film Festival. Many of the students who created the video are now in Hollywood, working as animators.

We were able to make a digital video for a fraction of the cost of a Hollywood product and deliver a health education program in spite of the funding challenges. Smoky Lies has all the bells and whistles that an animated cartoon presents for the sheer enjoyment of children. It also packs a health message and a moral message, and it shows children that Big Tobacco can be fought and beaten.

Spreading the Word

We hope children absorb the message that they don’t have to be suckers and allow themselves to be enticed through glossy and misleading advertising into a life of addiction, disease, and disability. Now we are trying to find a way to distribute this video. We believe it has a good chance of making youngsters think twice before they become enmeshed in the horrors of the addiction that follows just a few cigarettes.

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For more information about Smoky Lies, or to get involved in the effort to distribute it to schools, please contact the C. Everett Koop Institute, College Street, Hanover, NH 03755. Telephone: (603) 650-1450. Website: www.dartmouth.edu/dms/koop.